DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 798 PS 028 402

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TITLE She Is So Popular: A Study of Sixth Grade Girls' Views on Popularity.
PUB DATE 1999-05-00
NOTE 95p.; Master of Arts Thesis, Antioch University.
PUB TYPE Dissertations/Theses - Masters Theses (042)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Assertiveness; *Females; Grade 6; Interpersonal Competence; Interviews; *Middle School Students; Middle Schools; Peer Acceptance; Peer Evaluation; Peer Groups; Peer Influence; *Peer Relationship; Physical Development; *Popularity; Qualitative Research; Social Status; *Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

In this qualitative study, five female students in the sixth grade were interviewed and surveyed about their views on popularity at their urban middle school in Ohio. The objectives of the study were to investigate whether middle school girls engaged in academic competition, to describe their subjective experiences of popularity in middle school, and to describe their views about academic competition. Most students reported competing for popularity in the areas of academic achievement, social interactions, speaking out, and physical development. The study also explored positive and negative consequences of popularity competition. (Contains 31 references.) (Author/EV)

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She is so popular:

A Study of Sixth Grade Girls' Views on Popularity

A Thesis

Presented to Antioch University

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

of the Master of Arts Degree

By

Debra Ann Sullivan

Yellow Springs, Ohio
May, 1999

Approved by:

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Abstract

A Study of 6th Grade Girls Views on Popularity

Debra Ann Sullivan

May, 1999

In this qualitative study, five female students in the sixth grade are interviewed and surveyed about their views on popularity at their urban middle school in Ohio. The objectives of the study are to investigate whether middle school grade girls engaged in academic competition, to describe their subjective experiences of popularity in middle school, and to describe their views about academic competition. Most students reported competing for popularity in the areas of academic achievement, social interactions, speaking out and through physical development. Positive and negative consequences of popularity competition are explored.

Acknowledgments

I thank all of the women who have given their lives to making my life better. Their courage has been an inspiration to me and given me the strength to pursue my thesis. I also thank the young women participants of my study who gave me their time, reflections, and patience. Without their unique insights, I could not have begun my work.

Most importantly, I thank my wonderful husband Steve and my children, Mason, Cristina and Brice. Their unending patience and dedication to our family life means so much to me. My Grandma, Wilhelminia Waggoner and my late Grandpa Delbert Dyer Waggoner, gave me the foundation that I needed to accomplish my dreams. My family has shown me the way to grace.

A special thank you to my best girlfriends for understanding the special bonds that girls have and for respecting those bonds. I am grateful for the experiences that we have shared.

Lastly thank you, Homeroom 119 at Clark Middle School in Springfield, Ohio. You were my first real class. You taught me so many lessons about children and about myself.

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Chapter I

Introduction and Rationale

As an American woman and a classroom teacher, I am often reminded of my middle school years. My sixth grade students are humored by my own middle school stories. It was an awkward time for me. I was clumsy, eccentric, quiet, creative and eager to please. I wanted to be a successful student, friend and popular teen. I wanted to be a part of the "in crowd", but popularity came with a price for me. Somewhere along the way I lost a part of myself, my playful childhood became a fearful adolescence. I was afraid of not being accepted, liked, appreciated or valued. Friends, hobbies and interests were given up in the pursuit of attaining popularity. I was very angry, even livid at times. I wanted to be accepted as an adult and respected for my personal thoughts, preferences and beliefs. The need for peer acceptance actually lowered my self-esteem. Of course this self realization came to me years after internal debriefing. Sharing experiences with adult friends, peers and my own students and children helped me to understand my teen passages and choices.

My Daughter

Then I had my own daughter. My husband, Steve, had been raising Cristina from a previous marriage. Cristina was seven when she first came into my life. I was thrilled to finally have a daughter. I started to recall my own past and reflect on my experiences as she made similar passages through her life. Sometime during Crissy's tenth year, I began to notice changes in her behavior. The warm, cute, creative, and open-minded daughter that I knew changed. It began at about the age of ten. She became actively interested in pleasing all of her friends and no one else. As I watched her sacrificing her personal beliefs and aspirations in the name of friendship, popularity and fads. I felt that she was really losing a part of herself. By the time that she turned twelve, she was so far away from the values that her father and I instilled in her, that I barely recognized her. It is funny how parents watch their children grow and change and turn into adults. Children can often seem like strangers, one moment we know them and another moment they become someone else.

The conflict

Last October was Crissy's 13th birthday. A momentous day for most American girls. We had a special party planned. She was to invite her friends and for the first time boys would be invited to her birthday party. It was a big leap for her father and I, but we forged ahead. About a week before the party, I discovered that Crissy told her best friend that she could not attend her party because she was not popular enough. Aside from the total embarrassment and humiliation that I felt toward her behavior, I was more concerned with the idea that Crissy saw nothing wrong with it. Not only was I disappointed with her, but I questioned my parenting skills. I was faced with the realization that Crissy was influenced more by her peers and the pecking order established at her school, than the moral and ethical beliefs and values of her mother and father.

This one incident changed my relationship with Crissy forever. I wanted to believe that my child would not succumb to peer pressure, but this was no longer possible. I had to accept that peers were my child's primary concern and that most everything that she was focused on in some way would guarantee her position and popularity.

The school girls

As I was experiencing these issues with Crissy at home, I noticed that the sixth grade girls in my classroom were also behaving in a similar fashion. The girls were especially competitive over grades. When I passed graded work back to the girls, they swarmed like bees, comparing and contrasting scores and comments. They droned over every detail of marks and words chosen for comments. I tried hard to ignore the constant flutter of corrected papers as they were returned to the students. I waited until the last minute of the day to pass back graded papers in an effort to avoid the drama, but they stayed after school for their dramatic performances. Then grade cards were issued and the competition continued.

Finally, I started to observe their reactions in an attempt to understand their behavior. I began to notice that the most popular girls in the class had the highest scores, and the least popular girls in the class generally had the lowest scores. When a girls grade declined, so did her popularity among other girls.

The importance of popularity

Popularity for my sixth grade students seemed to be the ultimate measure of self-worth and self-confidence in my classroom. My efforts to dispel popularity competitions had

little effect on the girls. Popularity determined who they walked to school with, where they sat at lunch, who they shared secrets with, which parties they were invited to attend, and the teams they were picked for in physical education class. Popularity measured their acceptance both in the classroom and outside of the classroom.

Determining popularity was a little more complicated than just grades. There were other hidden factors that contributed to the perceived popularity of girls but finding the key to these secrets would take some investigation. Among the top factors is academic achievement. Girls seek acceptance from their peers through good grades and special project work. Next to achievement, girls achieve peer popularity through social networking and speaking out. Girls have a complicated labyrinth of social relationships based on a multitude of conditions. Schoolgirls speak out in loud voices to obtain immediate recognition and attention. They sometimes use speaking out as a way to advance their spot in the pecking order. Physical development of the girls also plays a key role in their notoriety.

Purpose of Study

Popularity is defined by being liked or accepted by the greatest number of people, popularity is the primary goal in the minds of most adolescent female students. Factors that

contribute to girls' popularity are family background, physical appearance, social development and academic performance (Adler, 1992).

It is the purpose of this study to investigate the dimension of popularity in sixth grade girls lives and to gain an understanding of what popularity reflects for these girls and why it is so important to them. This project focuses on the content of popularity and the factors that influence girls popularity in a sixth grade urban classroom.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Introduction and Discussion About Girls Popularity in Middle School

Schools are an environment where children determine social order by their interactions with other students, parents and teachers. Each child's awareness of her/his social position is influenced by her/his idea of her/his own status. Popularity, defined by being liked or accepted by the greatest number of people, is the primary goal for adolescent female students. Factors that contribute to girls' popularity are family background, physical appearance, social development and academic performance (Adler, 1992). Studies of children's own awareness of their popularity reveals that 5th and 6th grade girls were the most accurate at perceiving their own likability (MacDonald, 1991). This only reinforces the idea that popularity is one of the key elements to a girls survival in the middle school years. "Girls at this developmental crossroad share a set of challenges as they come to grips with issues of autonomy and connection" (Cohen & Blanc, 1996, p.13).

Self-concept or self-esteem in the middle grades is important because it is a time when girls are gaining basic learning and ability, are founding patterns of connection

with ideas and people, and are creating the framework for their individual goals (Backes, 1994). Unfortunately there is evidence that girls moving into a middle school setting suffer a decrease in self-esteem, while boys do not suffer the same decline in self-esteem (Anderman & Midgley, 1997). This decline in self-esteem puts girl students at-risk of low self esteem. Backes (1994) study reveals that, "for females, middle school experience results in a statistically significant decline in self-concept. Females in this study doubted their abilities more than males and had less positive feelings of self-worth" (p. 23). In additional research studies, there are critical relationships in girls between peer-related dilemmas in sixth grade and across-time adjustments measures, such as academic success, self-esteem, school conduct, and social support. These studies are significant because they have shown that some adolescent females develop critical adjustment difficulties, including lowered self-esteem, lowered grades, difficulties with peer relations and other behavioral problems (Chung, Elias & Schneider, 1998).

Upon analysis of the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and Girls Development, Rothenberg (1995) suggested that girls have a positive self-concept in the primary grades but by the time they reach the age of 12, they suffer a weakening of self-esteem and decreased perception of their body image. This observation is significant because it again

emphasizes that teen girls are at-risk for low self-esteem and behavioral problems.

In addition to the problem of low self-esteem, girls are often treated differently than boys in the classroom. Lawton (1994) interviewed Myra and David Sadker, who have been researching gender related issues since the late 1960's. In their work, the Sadkers' have concluded that as girls mature through the middle school years, their self-confidence nose-dives. As girls mature they begin to censor themselves, becoming more uncommunicative and concealing their emotions (Lawton, 1994).

Perhaps the most concerning findings are Henning-Stout's (1998) allegation that research assessments fail to address two important areas of concern.

> "First, girls in late childhood and early adolescence have been found to question the validity of their own experience, that is, to question the credibility of their own perceptions. Second, girls are troubled by relational crises. For girls, an interpersonal crisis may stand as significant barriers to daily functioning over the course of its development and resolution" (p. 448).

Although Adler's (1992) study focused on upper-class and middle-class females, her insight from studying the "less

privileged" girls is that they viewed the upper-class and middle-class students as spoiled, but they were privately jealous of those females. In Adler's study, most of the popular girls came from affluent families and the girls believed that their high socioeconomic status leveraged their popularity.

Purpose of this literature review

This literature review is intended to present research that highlights the many facets of teen girls' popularity issues. The specific areas to be discussed in this review are (a) physical development and physical appearance in relationship to popularity (b) social development in relationship to popularity (c) academic achievement in relationship to popularity (d) preservation of popularity, and (e) teachers' and parents' role in girls' popularity. Such an understanding of teen, girls views on popularity should help provide insight and direction for future improvement in the academic, social and emotional development of girls. Girls desire and deserve to be heard. Their voices are often masked by the emotions and complexity of relationships that they experience on a daily basis. They have vast connections to the world that we cannot possibly understand unless we give them the voice to be heard.

Physical development and appearance relationship to popularity

The area of physical appearance as related to popularity refers not just to naturally occurring physical features, but to clothing, make-up, hair styles and physical development of the girl's body. Although Adler (1992) notes on appearance are related to kindergarten students, this area of interest in regard to popularity only appears to grow as the girls age. Physical changes are one feature that may impact academic performance of teen girls. Sixth grade girls may be internalizing issues of body image, friendship, and relationships with adults. Each of these issues may positively or negatively effect their academic performance (Anderman, 1997).

The commercial media of advertisements, fashion, television and print also contribute to the pressure felt by girls. Girls compare their physical appearance to an idealized standard set by Madison Avenue executives. For many girls, normalcy is set to the standards that media portrays. Although girls may be willing to sacrifice greatly to meet the media's idealized girl, the standards are usually unobtainable for the majority of teen girls.

Social development in relationship to popularity

Social development is an integral portion of the popularity of girls. Research shows that girls often achieve social status by "going with" a popular boy. Going with a boy may refer to a variety of different activities. These activities may include public acknowledgment of a relationship, dating, kissing, hugging, attending school functions, sexual activity or just holding hands. The type of activity usually depends upon the norm of the clique.

Girls can elevate or decrease their popularity through their choice of boy partners (Adler, 1992). A girl may increase her status in the pecking order by going with a popular boy. Inversely, a girl may also find that her choice of a boy may also lower her popularity if the boy is unacceptable to the standards of the clique.

Also included in the area of social development is the girls' interactions with other girls. Adler (1992) states that "one of the most common forms of boundary maintenance among friendship groups, both intra- and interclique, involves the use of rumors and gossip. Shared secrets were passed among friends, cementing their relational bonds while derisive rumors were tactics girls used to create and maintain exclusivity" (p. 182). In a study by Hodges, Bukowski & Vitaro (1999) it is noted that girls were more likely than boys to commit acts of relational aggression against others. Relational aggression is defined as "acts

intended to harm a child's interpersonal relationships with peers (e.g., by encouraging one's friends to exclude someone from a social function or clique); girls are more likely than boys both to enact and receive this form of aggression" (p. 100).

For teen girls, adolescent relationships are more than a passing alliance. Girls invest vast amounts of time and energy into many long lasting relationships. Girls mature and develop complex ties among other girls. Boys' social development is often marked by the breaking of relationship ties. It appears that boys and girls arrive with distinct interpersonal bearings and contrary social encounters (Gilligan, 1982). This divergence in social development between boys and girls appears to begin in the teen years. "The deviance of female development has been especially marked in the adolescent years when girls appear to confuse identity with intimacy by defining themselves through relationships with others" (Gilligan, 1983, p. 170). Quandaries of identity may lead girls to alliances with idealized peer models as well as disputes with dissimilar peers.

Disputes with friends are taken very seriously among adolescent girls. These arguments may disrupt the entire popularity scheme of the girls social lives. Many times these fights and disagreements are followed by a sense of sadness or loss. Responses to these arguments are often verbal

outbursts rather than physical outbursts (Gilligan, 1992).

When teen girls have disputes with other girls, they often settle them in their own arena. They use their intense background of social relationships to fix their own problems. Their imaginative and creative solutions are often uncomplimented because of the "underground" techniques that they use to solve problems.

> "Drawing on their extensive psychological knowledge of relationships and feelings, they often arrived at complex and creative solutions to difficult relational problems. Yet these solutions, although sometimes elaborate, were unknown and therefore unacknowledged and unappreciated, within the public world of school". (Gilligan, 1992, p.13).

Academic performance relationship to popularity

One of the significant discussions to this thesis is the area of girls' academic performance. It appears that girls attain status from their peers for getting good grades or assessments and for carrying out complex tasks (Adler, 1992). This is also reflected by Cohen (1992), "Some girls conform to traditional expectations of girls in school, doing what is asked and speaking in turn or not at all. Like speaking out, this approach is two-sided, and depending on the girl and her

context, can play to girls' advantage or disadvantage" (p. 17). Two stereotypes of the category of doing school are: (a) schoolgirl, and (b) play schoolgirl. A "schoolgirl" is conventionally called a "good girl". She negotiates her way through school typically by turning her work in on time, listening to authority figures, obeying all rules and meeting adults expectations. The "play schoolgirl" on the other hand, behaves as if she were a "good girl" but does this with the disguise of hiding up her real identity. "Girls using this approach are outwardly compliant and successful in school but leave clues to their other identities and worlds, which may fit uneasily with school culture" (Cohen, p.17).

The research findings made by Adler (1992) indicate that sixth grade girls are more likely to nurture friendships with others female students of similar academic achievement. Additional findings indicate that female teen students' grades may improve if they have friends with good grades (Berndt, 1992). It appears that girls are willing to change themselves in a relationship with a peer for the sole purpose of staying friends, (Gilligan, 1992).

Within each grade level there might be both a clique of high academically inclined popular girls and a clique composed of popular girls who did not perform as well academically (Adler, 1992). Although little research has focused on adolescent female achievement, Emil (1993) maintains that for numerous teen females, academic

achievement is the most substantial facet of self-esteem. Maintaining academic achievement means paying attention to instructions, general attentiveness in class, completing homework, accepting special projects, competing with peers for grades and even changing cliques.

Although Horner's (1968) study addresses the issue of women's views of competition and the negative side effect of competition with men, we may find threads of similarity among teen girls competing with other teen girls. She states that fear "exists because for most women, the anticipation of success in competitive achievement activity, especially against men, produces anticipation of certain negative consequences, for example, threat of social rejection and loss of femininity" (p. 125).

Preservation of Popularity

Girls tend to conform to rules, both implicitly and explicitly and exert these rules upon others. They will follow the expectations and rules of the popular crowd and ignore their inner voice. Girls' advanced academic performance in school reflects, not only their superior intelligence, but their more resigned association to the norm (Adler, 1992).

Accumulation and preservation of popularity sways girls' capability to acquire and maintain friendships and develop self-esteem. Girls' center their attention on becoming and attaining popularity and often ignore their personal dreams, needs, and desires. They lose a sense of their individuality and goals. This focus on popularity (and lack of popularity) exemplifies the models of girls idealized gender roles (Adler, 1992).

What separates girls from boys is best described as follows:

> "Unlike the boys, who search for the physical limits of their bodies and the social limits of their school, group, and society through their efforts to challenge these limits, the girls carve out inner space. They live indoor lives; draw indoor scenes; and concern themselves with gathering others around them. They focus on the emotional dimension of expression and become more adept at intimacy and cooperation than at openly competing against others" (Adler, p. 184).

In this quiet and unassuming way, girls actively work toward gaining and maintaining their popularity.

At the same time that girls strive for and reach the heights of popularity, there are dangers awaiting for them

there. Gilligan (1992) speaks of middle school girls',

> "A sense of relational treachery is everywhere at this age. Divisions of cliques are visible reminders of the potential hazard of being too different, not pretty enough, not nice enough, subtle enough, smart enough. The most "popular" girls in the class move about boldly, however, comfortable with the authority invested in them and the image they portray. Often the most outspoken among the girls --though not necessarily with adults -- they have the power to gather some girls around them and to exclude others. As we might guess, then, such girls become the focus of much attention and much criticism and jealousy" (p. 101).

These popular girls are often outwardly complimented and attended to by other girls, but confidentially spurned and resented. This further complicates girls' perceptions of popularity, self-image, and self-esteem. They have to translate the words and the actions they hear into the hidden language of being a girl.

Girls can cross popularity borders. Cohen (1992) describes this process as girls using characteristics needed to move in and out of particular groups. They use the

characteristics needed to fit into a specific group. These types of girls fall into two categories: (a) schoolgirl/coolgirl, and (b) the translator. The schoolgirl may "achieve success in school, with peers, and in their home community, becoming proficient in two or more codes of speech and behavior, thus gaining stature" (p. 17). The translators are "emerging leaders, able to understand and communicate across cultural groups and even facilitate or mediate others' interactions across such divides as school, community, or adults and adolescents" (p. 17).

Middle school programs should directly address issues of power, gender, and mistreatment of girl students. Girls who are better acquainted and abreast of obstacles will have a better self-image and empower themselves to make better decisions (Backes, 1994). Elias and Branden-Muller (1994) write, "If students are preoccupied with their social difficulties, they will not be available mentally or emotionally to absorb, retain, and creatively use the learning opportunities they receive at school and at home" (p. 6). These issues are important not just to the girls that we teach but to the society that these girls will be serving. Parents, teachers and leaders of girls have many opportunities to enhance girls self-esteem and learning.

Teacher's and parent's role in girls popularity

Girls are often articulate when they discuss how they feel and what they think about themselves and their friendships. This behavior may bring these girls into disharmony with adults or other girls. Many adults tell girls to "be nice" as a way to stay in control of or mask their feelings. Teachers often use their authority to cease ongoing disagreements or tight cliques by changing physical groupings or activities (Gilligan, 1992).

Because girls are told to "be nice", they find it difficult "to tell the difference between genuine pleasure and love in a relationship and the pretense of pleasure and love" (Gilligan, 1992, p. 105). "Behaving and acting nice" only pushes girls feeling down, repressing their communication and making it more difficult to maintain friendships. This behavior is often referred as "speaking out" (Cohen, 1996). Speaking out is an assertive behavior that forces others to hear girls' voices. There are two types of girls who speak out: (a) the maverick leader, and (b) the troublemaker. Usually a girl who speaks out has a strong sense of her own identity and her place in the world. Maverick leaders speak out because, "Some girls who habitually speak out make themselves highly visible in their schools and become publicly acknowledged as leaders", (Cohen, p. 17). The troublemakers are, "identified as negative leaders with unrealized potential. Girls viewed as

troublemakers may increase their risk of failure until they change others' perceptions of them" (Cohen, p. 13).

Much has been written in the literature about communication tools available to help teachers and parents to better facilitate girls progress at home and at school. Funk (1993) suggests seventy strategies to support the movement toward gender equity. Many of the strategies involve improving self-esteem in girls. Her strategies include modeling and teaching assertive behavior, giving girls leadership roles, teaching females to accept feedback, teaching girls to recognize their own negative self-talk, giving females an opportunity to voice opinions, and valuing those opinions. Strategies for assisting girls at school are also noted in Girls in the Middle, (Cohen, 1996):

> "This report suggests that what works to support the success of middle school girls is congruent with sweeping national reform strategies, such as breaking schools down into learning communities where adults and youngsters know and care about each other, promoting active, cooperative learning strategies, and developing an interdisciplinary, theme-based curriculum that engages student's concerns...Only then will girls of all backgrounds and the widest range of negotiating strategies be

assured of thē opportunity to author themselves" (p.94).

These strategies are good strategies not only for girls but for the learning and teaching community as a whole.

Summary

The review of literature strongly indicates that adolescent girls experience issues related to popularity, which effect them socially, physically and academically. As a result of teen girls perceived need to attain and maintain popularity, girls spend enormous amounts of time and energy focusing on popularity. Ignoring issues of popularity and teen girls does not diminish the effects of this pursuit.

I have described many categories and characteristics of girls' behavior. It is important to note that there may be categories that are not yet voiced and that girls can move from one category to another at anytime. "During their middle school years, girls may try on different strategies like so many coats as part of their self-discovery process....Understanding girls' experimentation with strategies can help educators re-examine girls' choices in light of their options", (Cohen, p.16).

Part of the difficulty in studying gender issues is that men and women seem to speak different languages. contain a

propensity for systematic mistranslation. (p. 173). These "different languages" often cause confusion among the sexes. In her book, In a Different Voice, Carol Gilligan (1982) believes that most past research is flawed because the female voice has been ignored. Gilligan asserts that additional, focused research on female issues be pursued. She notes that girls display a keen interest in maintaining friendships and relationships. Girls moral codes are permeated with solidarity and compassion for society's weaker members. Girls attribute greater importance to emotional values and because of this Gilligan believes that research should begin with women themselves. In my study I will focus on female teens only. Being a woman and the mother of a middle school girl, my research will focus on the female voice. I have struggled to have my own voice heard but I am also aware of my female students needs. They deserve to be heard.

Chapter III

Methodology

Purpose of the study

This section is a description of the qualitative study took place from February 1999 until May 1999. The purpose of this study is to investigate the dimension of popularity for sixth grade girls and to gain an understanding of what popularity reflects for these girls and why it is so important to them. The population of this study is of particular interest to me because it focuses on the sixth grade, urban girls in my own classroom. By selection of my research participants and research setting, sixth grade girls are uniquely distinct than those previously studied by Gilligan (1982) and Adler (1992). My research will compliment these earlier studies based on different socioeconomic and aged students.

An awareness of the dynamics of popularity attitudes of girls is valuable because it will give me, a middle school educator, a better understanding of their social and educational needs. Girl's views are often ignored or lessened simply because of their gender. This study will amplify their voices and give me insight into the ways girl develop educationally and socially.

Purpose and hypotheses of the study

The purpose of this study was to determine what factors contributed to the perceived popularity of female students and to understand the perceptions of popularity among the participants. I hoped to see connections to academic performance and physical appearance to the popularity of girls.

The school

I based the analysis of material compiled from bi-weekly observations, conversations and surveys with children and teachers during the 1998-1999 school year in a public middle school located in a lower socioeconomic neighborhood in Springfield, Ohio. The schools total enrollment is 466 students. There are 164 sixth grade students, 165 seventh grade students, and 137 eighth grade students. The population is 71% Caucasian students, 26% African American students and 3% other minority students. 80% of the student body are on the free school lunch program. The school is located in a midwest (Ohio), urban school district with a population of approximately 70,000 (City of Springfield, Chamber of Commerce).

The two story, 27 classroom school was built in 1954. The architecture of the school is of one straight corridor

with classrooms on both sides of the corridor. The brick exterior of the school is a putty gray. There is not a playground, ball court, or any other outside recreational area. There is a grassy area in front of the school. There are not any flowers or shrubs planted in the school yard. The halls of the school are bland with gray lockers, gray wall tile and pale yellow walls. Many of the ceiling tiles are missing and the old exposed adhesive is visible. The floor tiles have been randomly replaced with mismatched tiles of various colors and patterns. Even though the physical facility of the school is in poor condition, the school itself is clean and appeared organized.

The light blue classroom has no windows or ventilation except a window that is screened to the central hall. During the bulk of the observations and interviews, this screened window to the corridor is kept closed to reduce noise and to ensure privacy of the participants. I had purchased an air cleaner to help purify the air. The room is decorated with a "Winnie the Pooh" wall paper border that I purchased. Also there are many inspirational and instructive posters. Classroom rules are posted on the outside of the door so that the students could see them when they entered the room. There are two book shelves with a variety of paperback books for the children to use freely. Graded papers are passed back via the use of stackable mailboxes located on shelves in the room. Boxes of crayons, markers, rulers and scrap paper have

been purchased by the teacher and are easily available to all students. Ample storage space is available on classroom shelves for student portfolios, supplies and books. Each student has an assigned classroom desk with a seat attached. The desks are in poor condition and many students are physically too big for the desks provided. The classroom has been visited by two mice and a few cockroaches this year. The custodial staff is good at dealing with these intruders.

In my observations of my classroom, the desks were arranged in a U pattern with three concentric rows to the U. My desk is at the opening of the U in front of the classroom. The front of the classroom is marked by the expanse of a green chalk board. A gray steel door is in the back of the classroom.

The children enter the school at 8:50 a.m. During inclement weather, the children may be held in the gymnasium from 8:35 a.m. until 8:50 a.m. with the entire buildings' sixth and seventh grade classes. The children are scheduled on a block schedule. This particular group begins school with homeroom at 9:00 a.m. At 9:05 a.m. they begin first period in the neighboring classroom. They have science, and math for the first three periods of the school day in the same classroom with the same instructor. At 11:05 a.m., the students visit their lockers to get their books for their afternoon classes. They carry their books back to their homeroom and wait to be dismissed for lunch. Lunch is

dismissed at 11:50 a.m. and the students go directly to their afternoon block instructor. The afternoon block consists of two periods of Reading and Language Arts and one period of Social Studies. I teach the afternoon block to the students participating in this study. After the afternoon block (at 2:04 p.m.), the students have coeducational physical education classes, they then return to our classroom for a study hall from 2:44 p.m. until the dismissal of school at 3:30 p.m.

The teachers

The two primary teachers of the group studied are both first year teachers with educational degrees from small, local, liberal arts programs. The male Math and Science teacher substituted for one year prior to coming to the school. I teach Reading, Language Arts and Social Studies. I substituted for three years prior to accepting the permanent position. Both of us cooperatively transition students from one subject to another on a daily basis and share responsibilities for hall duty, parental contacts and student discipline.

The children

In my classroom, the overall population is twenty three students. Two students (one male and one female) are present for study hall and homeroom only. They attend special education courses for the remainder of the school day. One male student attends some special education courses and rejoins the class for social studies, homeroom and study hall. There are eleven girl students and thirteen male students. Of the female students, there is one African American girl and ten Caucasian girls. The male students population is four African American boys and nine Caucasian boys.

The study involves five of the female students in my classroom. The selection of the girls is based on multiple levels academic achievement and class popularity. Due to the high percentage of transient students in my school, I selected these particular girls because they have been attending the school for the entire year. I also anticipate that the girls would complete the school year at the same school. The average age of the students is eleven years old, some of the students turned twelve during the course of this research. The students are described as heterogeneous academically mixed ability and from middle to low socio-economic backgrounds. Consent was verbally requested from the girls and parents, then requested in writing through the use

of a letter to the parents. During initial conversations with the students and parents, the general nature of the study was explained and the requirements for the participants was reviewed. The students are instructed to speak freely during interviews and to only speak when they were comfortable. The students are also informed that they were not required to participate in the study and that if they did not wish to respond to any particular question, they are not required. The students are made aware that a tape player would be used during the interview process and were told that they could review their interview transcripts at any time. Most of the students are excited and eager to participate in the study. The students are profiled below.

"Rene's" story

Rene is 12 years old. She is the African American daughter of a factory worker (father) and health care provider (mother). Her mother and father are married and live together in a rented home in the inner city, just far enough away from school for her to be eligible for bus transportation. Her family is not eligible for the free school lunch program.

Rene is the eldest of three children. She has both a nine and a ten year old brother. Both of Rene's brothers have been in serious trouble at school this year. One of her

brothers was removed from school and placed in a another school for children with behavior problems. Her mother has visited the school on several occasions this year to check on Rene's progress and to visit on presentation days. Rene's mother has been open to calls and notes from the teacher and accepts suggestions to help Rene's progress at school. Rene's father has not visited the school or spoken to any of her teachers this year.

Being one of the most physically developed girls in the sixth grade, Rene is aware of the vast differences between her body and the other girls in the sixth grade. Rene is a light skinned, black girl with clear blue eyes. She has fought mild acne breakouts. She towers over the other girls with a height of approximately five feet and five inches and she weighs about 125 pounds. Rene's athletic build fits her wardrobe which consists of sporty athletic styles, fitted jeans, taut tee-shirts and name brand athletic shoes. Occasionally Rene will wear a skirt. There are times when Rene arrived at school with a eye make-up and lipstick, but this was not a regular occurrence. She typically wears her brown-black hair straight, short and neat. Her mother, a former beautician, keeps her hair trimmed and up to date.

Rene has been a high academic achiever throughout her school career. Her grades are mostly A's and a few B's. She has not been retained at any grade level. This year she received a few detentions for minor infractions. These

infractions usually involved arguing with other students during class time. Rene completes 100% of her homework assignments and class work. She was often the first one finished during testing and sought additional work to do. Her attendance is excellent. Rene is a teacher's assistant. She helps me with bulletin boards, grading and organization. Other students describe her as stubborn, bright, outrageous, friendly, outgoing, and eager to display her talents. During cooperative groupings, Rene is often the leader of the group. She has been described by her peers as one of the most popular girls in the sixth grade. Rene has excellent verbal skills and expresses herself freely and often.

"Melina's" story

Melina is an eleven year old girl in the sixth grade. She is the Caucasian daughter of a mechanic (father) and a student of nursing (mother). Melina's parents are married and live together in the family home in the inner city within walking distance from the school. Melina's father is occasionally absent from the family home for extended periods of time. During the course of this study, Melina's father was living in the family home and the family home is for sale. The family intends to move to a small, neighboring community near Melina's maternal grandparents. Melina is not eligible for the free school lunch program.

Melina is the eldest of three children. She has a seven year old brother and a six year old sister. Melina's mother has visited the school during open houses, presentation days, and for parent and teacher conferences. Melina's father has not visited the school or spoken to any of Melina's teachers during this school year.

Melina began to physically develop during the last few months. She is a thin built girl with blonde hair, fair skin and gray-blue eyes. She gracefully carries her 95 pound body through the school day. Her typical clothing consists of loose jeans, loose fitted printed tee-shirts with colorful flowers or symbols, gym shoes and costume jewelry with smiley faces and flowers. Usually her wavy, shoulder length blonde hair is parted in the middle of her head and falls naturally to the sides of her thin, clean, clear complexion face. Rarely does Melina wear hair barrettes or hair ornaments. Melina has numerous warts on her hands. She is mildly bothered and self-conscience of their appearance, she sometimes wears pastel blue and green nail polish.

Over the past seven school years, Melina has not been retained or disciplined. Her grades are typically A's and B's. Melina has maintained a high level of academic achievement throughout her school career. She has never received a detention or a reprimand at school. She completes almost all of her class work and homework in a timely manner. Melina tends to take her time and work accurately and fast.

Her attendance is excellent. During cooperative grouping, Melina always participates and is sometimes a leader, depending on the other personalities in the group. By other students, Melina is described as creative, smart, friendly, quiet, and shy. Although Melina has excellent verbal communication abilities, she sometimes feels comfortable expressing herself.

"Nicole's" story

Nicole is a 12 year old girl in sixth grade. She is the Caucasian daughter of a self employed excavator (father) and a waitress (mother). Nicole's parents are divorced and live apart. She and her mother and brother live in a rented home within walking distance of the school. Her father lives about fifty miles away with Nicole's eighteen year old brother. Nicole's mother is involved in parent and teacher conferences and is receptive to suggestions made me. Nicole's father personally brought her school supplies on the second day of school and introduced himself to me. This was his only encounter with the school staff during the sixth grade year. Nicole receives free school lunches daily.

During the past few months of the school year, Nicole has begun to physically develop her five foot and four inches frame. What struck me immediately about Nicole is that she has a striking resemblance to my own daughter. Her straight,

shoulder length, medium brown hair was parted directly in the middle of her long and narrow, flawless face. Nicole's 115 pound frame carries around a wardrobe of fun and funky clothing. Typically, Nicole wears jeans, sporty striped nylon pants, taut printed tee-shirts, and athletic shoes. She often wears hair accessories and costume jewelry that display peace signs, flowers and smiley faces. She sometimes wears pastel blue nail polish or sparkles on her face.

Nicole's grades are inconsistent this year, but her grades have been primarily B's and C's. In past grades, Nicole has been an A and B student. Although only minor effort is needed to convert her to an A student, she often does not take the needed efforts to raise her grades. Nicole turns in about 90% of her daily class work and homework. Although Nicole tries hard at school, she appears to study very little outside of the classroom. Her attendance is excellent. This was the first year that Nicole was in trouble at school. She received a few detentions related to speaking out in the classroom at inappropriate times. These are considered only minor infractions. Nicole sees cooperative grouping as a time to socialize and have fun with her peers. Nicole has been described as sometimes stubborn and volatile. Nicole is not afraid to speak her mind at any time. She is well liked by her peers. Her verbal expression skills are excellent.

"Michelle's" story

Michelle turned twelve years in the sixth grade. She is the daughter of a truck driver (father) and a homemaker (mother). She is the middle child of a thirteen year old sister (at the same school) and a nine year old sister at the neighboring elementary school. Being at the same school with her older sister has been difficult for Michelle. Michelle has carved out her own identity at school. Michelle walks to school every day from her inner city home that her parents own. Her parents have not been at the school this year. Michelle's mother coope.ates and seems interested in the success of her children when she speaks with me. Michelle's father has not visited the school or spoken me. Her family does not meet eligibility for the school free lunch program.

Michelle entered the classroom this year already sporting the early signs of physical development. Her average build was still developing slowly over the school year. Her development may have been slowed due to the bursting of her appendix and an extended fight with infections relating to this incident. Michelle was hospitalized for several weeks during the fall (prior to this study). Michelle is approximately five feet and three inches tall and weighs approximately 110. Her limited wardrobe consists of fitted jeans, feminine tee-shirts and gym shoes. Her face is marked with occasional flare-up of moderate acne, but she does not

seem too bothered by it. I have never seen Michelle wearing make-up, nail polish or jewelry. Her straight, thick, medium, brown hair and bangs elongate her narrow, long face.

Academically Michelle strives for A's and B's, but she has had some difficulty achieving these goals this year. This may be caused by her rushing through assignments and not double checking her work. Michelle has been an A and B student in passed years but this year her grades have ranged from A's to D's. Michelle has never been retained at school and her attendance is excellent. During cooperative groupings Michelle leads her peers. She is sometimes loud and outspoken but seeks approval from others. She has been reprimanded for speaking at inappropriate times. Michelle has average verbal communication skills and she often uses her skills to seek attention and acceptance from her peers.

"Kaylee's" story

Kaylee turned twelve in the sixth grade and is the youngest child of a homemaker (mother) and roofer (father). Kaylee lives in a nearby home that her parents own. She has a fifteen year old sister in high school and a thirteen year old brother in this school. Kaylee's mother has been very active at school throughout the school year. She attends parent and teacher conferences, discussing Kaylee's progress with teachers, counselors and administrators, offering snacks

for the class, and coming to school on project days. Kaylee's father has attended some parent and teacher conferences and has been proactive in speaking on behalf of his daughter's education.

Kaylee is a below level achiever and has struggled throughout the school year. Although Kaylee was tested for learning disabilities and special education eligibility, she did not qualify, as she was high functioning for special education. Both of Kaylee's parents have continued to pursue alternatives for Kaylee's education. Kaylee's mother and father take some responsibility for Kaylee's low ability, as they have had low expectations for her outside of the school setting and have treated her as the "baby" of the family for many years. Just weeks ago, Kaylee's mother informed me that is still washing Kaylee's hair for her. Chronic ear infections (and minor hearing loss that may have resulted from the infections) may have impeded her academic and social progress.

Her baby face belies the early signs of physical development. Kaylee often smiles a sweet and happy smile that shines from her mouth to her eyes, behind the thick lenses of wire framed glasses. Her long, blonde hair is always neatly coiffed, curled and decorated by her mother. Her vast wardrobe consists of many pairs of loose sweat pants, cartoon tee-shirts and name brand athletic shoes. Her clothes are often large enough to drape over her five foot, three inch,

135 pound body, concealing her maturing body. On Kaylee's birthday she received a new birthstone ring to add to her many rings. She does not wear make-up or nail polish.

Kaylee has struggled academically this year. Her grades have been mostly C's, D's and F's. When reviewing her records, it has been noted that she has always struggled at school and especially with reading and writing, although the grades assigned do not reflect the same level of difficulty. Kaylee completes all of her class work and about 90% of her homework. She has never been recommended for retention and has never received a detention or reprimand. During cooperative grouping, I observe Kaylee as a follower.

Kaylee is well liked by the other students and was usually described as sweet, shy, nice, polite and friendly. She is very cooperative and sensitive with me. She cries easily and does not take direct criticism very well. Kaylee has low verbal skills and does not express herself often.

Design of the study

The study is conducted over a period of three months in the sixth grade classroom. Interviews with the five girls are used to gather most of the information. Often the children volunteered to return from lunch early to allow me to interview them in private. Each interview lasts from ten to thirty minutes and is taped. The girls are assured that the tapes would not be shared with others. In addition to the

interviews, classroom observations are carefully noted. The girls are observed in a variety of school settings: the cafeteria, physical education, dances, corridors and school yards. Near the conclusion of the study, triangulation is accomplished through the use of written surveys with the participants.

In order to grasp the girls' reality, I had to overcome my personal experiences and my shared experiences with my daughter. This was absolutely necessary for me so that I could free myself from the "objective" reality and to apply meaning to the experiences of my participants. This is possibly the most difficult part of my research. In one observation, I felt such a likeness with Nicole and an experience that I had in middle school, that I began to reflect my own experiences back to her during the interview process.

Another element of the equation is the interaction of the researcher being the teacher of the students. It is important for me to minimize the effects of the girls' personal reactions and feelings about myself (the teacher) in a way that would not effect the study. For example, prior to one interview Michelle is reprimanded for making a disparaging remark to another student. As the interview process begins, I include a debriefing of this incident, as a way for Michelle to vent any anger or uncomfortableness that she may feel toward me, the teacher. This type of examination

allows Michelle to express her feelings and protect the content of my study.

Chapter IV

Analysis of Findings, Conclusions, and Reflections

Treatment analysis

Girls enter the classroom with contextual expectations unique to them. Their experiences are not only meaningful to girls' development, but these experiences are necessary for girls' development. Girls gather information from every possible source. Conversations, body language, television, school, peers, commercial advertisements are to name just a few.

When the girls are asked to express themselves, they are more than willing to do so. They are anxious to share their thoughts and experiences with me. They want to be heard. To fully understand their beliefs, it is necessary to conduct in depth interviews and observations. The interviews provide a first hand account of their perceptions. This continuation of dialogue is necessary to further understand girls' issues and perceptions. The observations connect (and legitimize) the interviews. Finally, the written questionnaire gives me an additional tool to verify their perceptions.

Limitations

There are, however, four basic limitations to this study. First, the my own attitude toward the subject of popularity for girls. I have tried to put aside my own experiences to objectively account the participants interviews and observations. Also, I observed the girls inside the school setting. I was not able to observe parties, sleep overs, and other social and familial functions. Third, all of the girls attend the same school and are in the same classroom. Lastly, I am the parent of a middle school girl and because of this I have parental issues that I deal with on a daily basis.

Data is collected through observations in the classroom, lunchroom and on the school grounds, through interviews and surveys, and through literature reviews. Interviews are primarily conducted in the classroom on a weekly basis. Each girl is interviewed independently on at least seven occasions. Interview sessions ranged from ten to thirty minutes each, depending upon the topics discussed and the time available. The interviews are kept informal and the girls only participate when they wish to do so.

Attention is given to the methods used to collect data. Careful consideration is taken to not disturb the normal, natural function and environment of the classroom. The girls are asked to only respond when they feel comfortable to do

so.

Mindfulness is given to protect the privacy of the students. I am careful to interview the participants in a private and secure area. Tapes, surveys and notes are removed from the school on the same day as the interview. These items are taken to my home. Written identities are protected on all accounts by using alternative names for each participant.

By careful selection of my research participants and research setting, the participants are uniquely distinct than those previously studied by Adler (1992) and Gilligan (1990). Because these girls are in an urban, low socio-economic school, their voices have not yet been heard.

Interview and observation findings

Initial interviews and observations are conducted throughout several weeks in the spring of 1999. My findings include some unexpected results. From the onset of my interviews, I discover that popularity was based on academic performance, physical development, social interactions and speaking out. These results surprised me somewhat.

Physical development: "let's just say, boys have hormones"

As the girls enter sixth grade this year, their bodies are at different stages of development. Melina's narrow, straight frame grows in height but not in curves whereas Rene comes into sixth grade with the body of a fully developed woman. The other girls are in various stages in between Melina and Rene.

During the course of the interviews we talk at length about physical development. All of the girls agree that having breasts is important in peer popularity, but none of the girls admit to accepting this factor as their own criteria for popularity. It seems as if the group knows that it was a factor, but they do not want to say that they take part in propagating this belief.

For Nicole physical development is simply an imposed criteria of popularity. She believes that the boys value large breasts and full hips and behinds. Nicole's presumptions about boys' beliefs and values regarding popularity, influence her own beliefs about popularity. Every time I asked Nicole who the most popular girl in the class is, she responds that Rene is the most popular. Upon questioning Nicole, she identifies that physical development is one of the reasons that she perceives Rene as popular. Nicole does not assign this attribute to her own value

system, she places this judgment at the hands of the boys in the class. She says, "Boys have hormones, let's just say that. She's more prettier."

These sixth grade girls clearly feel uncomfortable about talking about physical development. The girls, less endowed, cringe at the sound of the questions that contained the words, breasts, physically developed and developed bodies. They admit that they think about these issues more often than they speak about it. It is not something that "nice girls" discuss and if you do discuss it, you must be jealous of the other girls.

At the beginning of the school year, I put a growth chart on the wall and marked everyone's height. Aside from Rene, all of the girls have grown at least two inches. In the teen years, finding comfort in your body is difficult because it changes daily. These girls are constantly updating their image of their own physical identity as well as the identity of their peers. This task is crippled by the bombardment of media, advertisement and celebrity images that pound on them daily. These outside influences dictate to these girls what their "short comings" are and what they need to be (or to buy) to become accepted through advertisements.

Acceptance of physical development and appearance is more than just the signs of womanhood. The appearance of blemishes, acne and warts is very painful to the girls. Michelle is teased frequently about her mild acne. She

reports that these verbal jabs do not bother her, but her facial expressions and blushes of embarrassment tell another story. Facial appearance is just as important as breast size to these girls. Though only Rene wears make-up, the girls try to conceal these skin flaws by wearing their hair in different styles or keeping their hands at their faces.

Because make-up is not really an issue yet, the girls do not consider it important to popularity. However, they do feel that clothing is somewhat important. Fashion and trendiness is a minor element in the scheme of popularity. Even though these girls come from low socioeconomic households, they put a lot of effort into their clothing and accessorizing each day. Sometimes they trade and share clothes with friends, siblings and moms. This helps to expand their wardrobe and create an illusion of lots of clothes. The girls always notice new clothes, shoes and accessories. They respond with "oohs", "aahs" and "where'd ya get that?". This gives the wearer attention and recognition, even a boost to their status. Michelle has a very limited wardrobe and can not share clothes with her mother or siblings. She has about three outfits that she wears weekly but instead of varying her clothing, she sometimes varies her hairstyle. This allows her to get noticed too.

Academic achievement: "like you wanna get better grades than everyone else"

Without hesitation, the unanimous response to the question, "What makes a girl popular?" is grades. All of the participants clearly believe that girls compete mainly with other girls and the primary competition lies within the scope of academic achievement. Nicole says,

> "Like if you get good grades, you want to get better grades than somebody else, because if you get bad grades, you feel like an idiot and you want to try to get better grades than someone who is making fun of you."

For some of the girls the search for good grades has more to do with not getting put down, thus decreasing their popularity. This was true for Nicole and Kaylee. Other girls (Michelle, Rene and Melina) use good grades as a tool to attain status and get attention from peers, parents and teachers. Rene believes,

> "You have to at least go out with the cutest boy in the school, even if they are older than you. You have to get good, good grades so that everyone will be around you and just pay more attention to you. It's all about everyone paying more attention to

> you. It's all about everything being centered on you."

Having the class centered on you (the girl) is highly prized. Peers beg for your participation in cooperative groupings, teams, projects and partner work. Best said by Nicole, " more people will want to hang around with me." Being sough after (academically) is a boost to these girls' egos. They smile, talk louder and take charge. They rule cooperative groups and steer teams to work harder. Rene is often a highly prized classmate to have in a cooperative group. Nicole smugly says,

> " Well, she is my best friend and I'm not being mean or anything but she's real pretty and real smart and of course everybody wants to be around her and in her group. That's why they go, "Rene! Rene! Rene!" and stuff like that."

Nicole becomes sad when she reflects on the statement that she made, when I ask her why she says, "Because I get a lot of attention and the other people get left out." I bluntly ask her if she wants more attention. She meekly responds, "Yes."

For these sixth grade girls, good grades means inclusion into classroom activities. Poor grades means being left out.

I constantly question the girls about how they know everyone else's grades. Without hesitation, they reply that they tell one another. Telling is only the initial step. After the grades are shared, the girls compare papers. Every nuance of every mark is examined and analyzed by the girls for "expert" evaluation. These girls are grade connoisseurs. They compare answers, scores, teacher's comments and stickers.

These activities are very distracting to me, the teacher. I have taken many steps to alleviate this "compare and contrast" session that the girls routinely partake. Some of the steps that I have taken include a classroom mailbox system, passing back papers and grade cards as they exit the room, and simply talking to them about my concerns with their behavior. Each of these attempts have failed. The mailbox system (though still in use) is failing because the girls look into one another's boxes and gather at the boxes to continue their ritual. The method of handing out graded work as they exit does not work because the girls congregate outside of the room to proceed with their ceremony. Talking frankly to the girls about my concerns and frustrations did not work. The behavior simply went underground (via whispers and note passing) for a few days and then it resumed as a normal course of action. This sharing and comparing time appears to be a necessary means to communicate grades so that the girls can ascertain who is the most academically advanced (or achieved), and therefore the most popular girl.

Surprise! Speaking out: "Everybody knows not to mess with her"

"Speaking out" is an assertive behavior that forces others to hear girls voices. This behavior takes on various forms but the two most common types of girls who speak out are: (a) the maverick leaders, and (b) the troublemakers (Cohen, 1996). Speaking out allows some girls to gain attention and notoriety, while other girls earn negative attention and lowered peer acceptance. The type of response often depends on the girl herself, the subject that she is speaking out about and the words that she uses.

Clearly in this study, Rene is viewed by her peers as a maverick leader. Rene's speaking out seems to be more than just stating her opinions. Rene believes that speaking out has more to do with putting others in their place, so to say, or one upping the others. Although Rene does not typically use derogatory terms when speaking out, her comments are sometimes rude to others in the class. When I questioned Rene about her speaking out, she revealed that speaking out was a family practice. Her mother and father communicate to each other with comments similar to those of Rene's. Family power is attained through getting the best zinger in last. Popularity at school (for Rene) is partially attained through making cutting remarks to others. Contextually, popularity

for Rene has many origins and facets.

Sometimes Rene's comments are met with slight criticism or jealousy. Her words can be hurtful to others. Nicole describes the interactions clearly:

> "Like if you say umm, like if someone is talking bad at you, and you have to get back at them no matter what. If you don't they'll say, "You're just being a wuss, aren't you", She'll get back at them on the dot. Like if someone is in her way she'll say, "Get out of my way, you're in my way!". Somebody was up at the board yesterday when we were doing the time zone thing, she goes, "Excuse me, there's someone in my way". It was really funny."

Clearly Nicole had already figured out that speaking out is an important characteristic of peer popularity. This behavior seemed to be a common thread repeated in the interviews and surveys. Rene (as described by Nicole) fits the description of a maverick leader. She regularly speaks out as a way to attain acknowledgment. While this behavior brings Rene attention and popularity, similar behavior by Michelle, results in reduced popularity perception. Michelle will often repeat remarks made by Rene, this makes Rene angry. Rene then speaks out about Michelle. Because Rene is popular, other girls follow her lead. Girls' perceptions of

Michelle are negatively impacted as a result of Rene's comments. Michelle's speaking out does not fit either of Cohen's (1996) profiles of maverick leader or troublemaker. Michelle is not necessarily a troublemaker because she is emulating perceived popular behavior. She is not a maverick leader because she does not receive acknowledgment from her peers.

Michelle does receive criticism for her speaking out. Michelle notes the differences in reactions and uncovers feelings of envy and jealousy toward Rene.

> "Some girls, let's say Rene for example, think that they are all that and that they can say and do just about anything they want because they are popular, but they are just rude. Like Rene, she runs her mouth about everything, she says whatever she wants. When we say something back she gets mad. She can dish it out but she can't take it. I don't like her, she's rude."

Michelle realizes the inequity of her situation. Instead of dealing with the issue of different treatment for alike actions, she legitimizes Rene's behavior as rude and then distances herself from Rene's behavior.

Jealousy is also noted in an interview with Nicole. According to Nicole, the most popular girl is Rene. Rene's

maverick leadership allows her to "move about boldly, comfortable with the authority invested in them and the image they portray" (Gilligan, 1992, p. 101). This type of popularity does result in jealousy and criticism. This subtle nuance is easily picked up in Nicole's interview. Nicole begins one sentence with the preface, " I'm not being mean or anything but she's real pretty and real smart and of course everybody wants to be around her and in her group." It was clear to me that Nicole was slightly jealous of her friends attention.

Michelle is not the only girl who notices this inequity. Nicole speaks about the punishment for speaking out against Rene.

> "And she'll get back at anybody if anybody says something to her. She's mean and she's funny."

In some way Michelle's behavior and her peers reaction to her behavior inhibits others from speaking out. Melina describes why she doesn't speak out,

> "I don't stand up for myself. Rene is outspoken, bossy and rude and that helps you be popular, boys like that."

In my observations, Melina appears to be in the popular

clique. She describes the elements of popularity as being smart, pretty, and outspoken (speaking out). Melina does not see herself as popular even though she is intelligent and attractive. She feels that she is very shy and her shyness holds her back from being the most popular. There are times that I have seen Melina stand up for herself, but she does so in an adult fashion, with concise actions and politeness. The politeness of her behavior goes unnoticed by her peers. Melina does not receive attention for her mature mannerisms. Her mature behavior is not valued in the clique.

Melina does recognize that popularity is a mixture of the factors of physical development, speaking out and academic achievement. She describes Rene as the most popular for the following reasons,

> "A lot of people are afraid of her....Everybody knows not to mess with her....She would yell at people....She is smart, funny sometimes....She is moody....A lot of boys like her because of her looks. She's developed."

Popularity has key requirements for each girl. Attaining popularity brings so many opportunities for them. It gets them invitations to parties, dances, and movies. Popularity gets girls picked first in groupings, good spots at the cafeteria table and assurance of a friend to walk home with.

Kaylee describes requirements for popularity similar to the other participants and also believes that Rene is the most popular girl. Kaylee also believes that Rene is popular because of her developed chest. Even though Kaylee does not meet the requirements of academic achievement or speaking out, she still feels that she is popular. None of the other participants feel that Kaylee is a popular girl. I ask Kaylee if she wanted to be more popular and she responded that she would. She indicates that she would need better grades to become more popular. Kaylee is a very shy girl, and although she believes that good grades could improve her place in the pecking order, she never mentioned the need to speak out to increase her popularity.

"This is what ya gotta have to be popular...."

The girls are in agreement over what it takes to be popular. Popularity (in our class) is based primarily on three factors. They are academic achievement, physical development and speaking out. One of these requirements is not enough. To be the most popular girl, you need all three. Two of the three factors will place a girl high on the popularity scale. One factor is not enough to be considered popular.

Physical development of woman like features is very important to these sixth grade girls. Although they do not

like to discuss these issues, they do not hesitate to say that it is an important factor. Rene was the most physically developed girl in the study. She likes to show off her body by strutting noticeably in the class. Though other girls secretly wish they had her figure, they anxiously await for their own bodies to catch up with Rene.

Catching up with Rene physically is out of the girls' hands. They have to wait for "mother nature" to work her magic on their bodies. They have no control of their physical development. They do have control of their academic achievement.

Academic achievement is an area that the girls know they can better themselves in. These girls take extraordinary measures to increase their grades. They study hard, take on extra work, and compare and contrast notes with other students. Girls can be placed on different levels of popularity based on the many assessments that they receive at school on a daily basis. Of course, more emphasis is placed on interim and quarterly reports, special projects, reports and major tests than routine class work. Girls take advantage of every opportunity to share their successes with their peers. Usually they accomplish this by showing their graded papers to as many people as they can.

Survey Results

Each girl was given a survey with open ended and multiple choice questions (see appendices). The participants were given an unlimited amount of time to complete the survey in a secured and private area. This section analyzes the results of that survey.

Question 1: What are the requirements to be a popular girl in the sixth grade?

All of the five girls included the elements of academic ability and physical attractiveness in their answers. Academic ability was expressed using the words "smart" and "good grades". Physical attractiveness was described using the words "pretty", "looks", "fully developed" and "developed".

Physical attractiveness is expressed in two ways: "beauty" and "body development". Beauty refers to the face, hair, nails, clothing and complexion of the girls. The girls were very particular in rating each girl on physical appearance. Interestingly, there was a direct relationship between physical attractiveness and academic performance. Body or physical development refers to the development of breasts, hips, and woman like features. The girls are very perceptive of breast size. Except for the most popular girl, Rene, there was not a correlation between physical development and popularity, as many of the "unpopular" girls

were also physically developed. The language of the girls may seem simple but the underlying messages are clear, self esteem and peer value lie in the beauty and physical womanhood of girls. Girls who look like girls are less popular than girls who look like women.

Academic performance or grades equaled physical attractiveness as a prerequisite for popularity in the survey. There was a direct correlation between popularity and grades. Rene, Melina and Michelle are the top achievers in the class and the most popular girls. They attain much of their attention and recognition through graded papers. Attention is also given for honor roll and grade cards.

Another group of responses included terms as "strong", "standing up to boys", "coolness" and "acting out". These responses generally fit into the speaking out definition. For participants Michelle, Nicole, Rene and Melina the strength and power attained from speaking out is meaningful in the context of popularity. A sense of empowerment is achieved through the use of voice and expression of thought. This is especially true for Rene. In observations, interviews and through the survey, Rene continued to assert that her power of voice was the difference between her and the other girls. Her ability to speak out and up for herself gave her the edge on popularity. She was able to be the "ring leader" in the class by using her strong communication skills and her commanding verbal interchange with the other girls.

A description of "funny" was used on three of the five surveys by Melina, Michelle and Nicole. These girls value not only power of voice, but the strength of the lighthearted. In some ways Nicole exemplifies the use of comedy relief to difficult times. She uses her lighthearted sense of humor to gain attention and recognition from her peers. In most cases, Nicole receives positive reinforcement for her humor in the form of giggles, smiles, and verbal praise. She doesn't take her errors too seriously but she is also uncomfortable with accepting praise.

Question 2: Who determines which girls are popular?

All five participants responded to this question with the same answer. They feel that only the popular girls and boys determine who will be popular. This popularity review examines each aspect of the girls personality and character, only girls meeting the groups requirements will gain acceptance in the clique. Some girls may enter the group through alliance with one of its members, and gain additional support piece meal.

Question 3: In my class, _____ is the most popular girl. (Insert a name) She is popular for the

following reasons: (list as many as possible)

Four of the participants (including Rene) agreed that Rene was the most popular girl in the class. Their reasons for her position of popularity were her appearance, grades, speaking out, physical development and humor. These responses help validate the results to question one.

The one girl who did not agree with the others (Michelle) said that Nicole was the most popular girl in the class for the same reasons listed in the paragraph above. It should be noted however that Michelle admits some jealousy to Rene and may not concede her popularity to her.

Question 4: This was a rating system to rate values of certain elements to popularity.

Each aspect was rated on a scale of one to ten. One refereed to "not important". Five corresponded to "somewhat important" and ten related to "very important". The girls were instructed to rate the items to their effect on popularity status. I added up all of the possible responses. The lowest response is a score of five and the greatest possible response is a score of fifty.

The list of items were: school grades, athletic ability, clothing, family background, physical beauty, shyness, wealth, physical development, boyfriends, being able to speak

up for yourself, the friends that you have, rudeness, helping the teacher, fighting with others, grade cards, taking risks, prettiness, friendliness, good attitude at school, smoking, helping others, sexual activity, being invited to parties, participating in after school activities, getting good grades on special projects, wearing make-up and looking more like an adult.

Girls unanimously rated tens (a total of fifty points) to the categories of physical beauty, prettiness, getting good grades on special reports and grade cards.

Scores of forty to forty-nine were in the categories of school grades, clothing, being able to speak up for yourself and the friends that you have.

The areas of athletic ability, family background, wealth, physical development, boyfriends, rudeness, helping the teacher, taking risks, friendliness, good attitude at school, helping others, being invited to parties, participating in after school activities and looking more like an adult scored between thirty and thirty-nine.

Only twenty to twenty-nine points were scored in the areas of shyness, fighting with others and wearing make-up.

Finally under ten points were scored in the remaining categories of smoking and sexual activity. None of the categories scored in the range of ten to nineteen.

Question 5: What things do you do to become more popular?

All of the girls responded to the question with an answer of good grades or trying hard in school. Other answers included speaking out and acting cool. It was clear from the responses that the girls were aware of the necessary actions to maintain or improve their position in the pecking order. Considerable effort is expended by the girls to achieve popularity, especially in the area of academics. They strive to attain perfection in their class work and homework, seeking not only a good grade, but positive comments written in bright ink by the teacher. There is an unspoken value to an unwritten note on a paper, a special sticker or a rubber stamp of approval. These subtle signs of recognition are tangible signs of achievement in the language of girls. These small tokens of commemoration are shared with classmates, friend and foe, just as an athlete may wear a medal on her chest.

Question 6: Can girls popularity change over time?

Unanimously, these girls agree that popularity can change over time. The factors that initiate these changes are perceived as speaking out and improving grades or performance. This was another confirmation that girls feel empowered to change their position at school.

Question 7: Do you want to be more popular? If so, why?

Four of the participants said that they wished to be more popular for various reasons. Kaylee wanted others to see her as "cooler" and more of the clique group.

Unfortunately, Nicole felt that popularity would change her world. In response to the question she writes, "Yes! I really do because I'm ugly, fat, have bad grades and I don't have a boyfriend!" Her convoluted view (on this particular question) seems to perceive that popularity is the healer of all wounds.

Michelle wanted to be more popular so that she would not be "cracked on" as much. Her need for acceptance into the clique is very evident. She wants so much to be a part of the group that she will do almost anything to be accepted. She wants so much to be a friend of Rene's, but she takes the stance of a competitor. She does not have the advantages of speaking out and physical development of Rene.

Melina was the only girl who did not respond affirmatively to this question. Her response to the question in a self assured manner, "No, I feel fine the way I am." Melina has changed so much this school year. She does appear confident in her position.

Question 8: What can you do to become more popular?

Most of the girls reiterated responses to question number five, with the exception of Michelle. I found her response interesting. She wrote, "I can take care of myself more and be nicer." After I read the questionnaire I spoke with Michelle again about this question. She articulated her response even more. She wants to be more popular but she realizes that this cannot happen until she finds some peace with herself. She wants to do things for the sake of self improvement and helping others. She wants popularity on her terms, not on the terms and values of Rene's clique.

She also mentioned that she had been teased a lot about her complexion and she is taking care of her skin right and making better efforts at her appearance. This realization was a relief but it was a difficult transition for Michelle. Her eyes teared up as she spoke with me. Self assurance could not be attained through her peers any longer.

Question 9: Do you ever wish you could be like another student in our class? If so, why?

These answers varied from girl to girl. Three girls, Rene, Michelle and Melina, answered no. They felt self assured and happy with their current status in the pecking order. Kaylee answered affirmatively to the question but did not indicate a reason. Nicole indicated that she wished she could keep her own personality and have Melina's body and

Rene and Michelle's brains. Nicole clearly had picked out the desirable characteristics from each girl and put them together to make the perfect girl.

The survey provided additional confirmation of the interviews outcomes and enlightenment on other issues. The girls were very specific in voicing their opinions and ideas.

Conclusions

Although threads of similarity exist from school to school, this study finds that middle school girl's views on popularity vary from school to school. Each clique of girls determine their own criteria for becoming and maintaining popularity. The individual cliques set this often unspoken criteria and create a hierarchy of girls within the individual classrooms and schools.

The three primary factors that determine popularity in the class studied are academic achievement, physical development and speaking out. These factors were established in the interviews and confirmed through the surveys.

Reflections

These girls are incredible. Their voices connected me to my own teen past and to my present relationship with my own teen daughter. As I interviewed each participant, I remembered the importance of popularity and cliques in my own middle school experience. I related to the joy and pain that surrounds acceptance and rejection of cliques. Popularity is a central issue for girls because it means that we are accepted and valued by others. Acceptance is critical to the self-esteem of most human beings, but for girls it is woven into every aspect of their being. Peer acceptance and popular status means greater attention and value in society. This need for acceptance is of great concern to the teen girl as she negotiates her way into adulthood, she may continue to use her teen strategies to find her place in her adult world.

Reflections on physical development

Even though a sixth grade girl may have an adult "womanly" body, she often does not have the emotions of a mature woman. Physical development is a highly prized possession for some girls. Developing full breasts and rounded hips is a statement to the world that girls are becoming women. For teen girls, they update their self-image often because their bodies are changing so frequently. I remember by first bra, menses, and underarm hairs as steps into feeling like a grownup or adult. I also remember that my

early development of breasts gave me a lot of attention from my peers. Some girlfriends were curious of my growing bumps, some girlfriends were jealous and some girlfriends were in competition with me, asking me what cup size I wore and comparing it to their own. The girls participating in the study are engaged in the same behavior. Rene, the most physically developed girl, is the most popular girl in the class. The other girls outwardly admire her body but secretly are jealous of her development.

In our fast paced American society, our girls want to grow up faster too. They want to look and feel like adults. Perhaps they even feel that as a society, we will only value them for having large breasts. Our American culture values large breasts, thin waists, and clear complexions. These girls know that ordinary women go to extraordinary lengths to attain these things. They (as I did) wonder if they will need breast implants, liposuction and/or plastic surgery to attain acceptance in our society. The "perfect" girl as shown to us in commercial advertisements and through various forms of the media, is so far away from what the average girl actually is. But the reality is that these girls are beautiful. They are exactly where they should be physically. They are unique and attractive because they are unique. They are completely unaware of their beauty because of the commercial images that bombard them daily. Brown and Gilligan (1992) suggest the following about girls physical changes,

> "These changes on girls' bodies visually disconnect them from the world of childhood and identify them in the eyes of others with women, and thus with images if women and standards of beauty and goodness - physical and moral perfection. Girls become looked at, objects of beauty, talked about and judged against standards of perfection and ideals of relationship. And girls learn to look at their "looks" and to listen to what people say about them" (p. 164).

This focus on physical development is self deprecating for the girls. It devalues the human being, the girl. The fact is that girls come in all shapes and sizes. They should not be judged on their physical appearance, but they themselves use physical development as a standard for attaining popularity.

Pipher (1994) states, "Now, when more girls live in cities full of strangers, they are judged exclusively by their appearance. Often the only information teenagers have about each other is how they look" (p.56). I disagree with this statement. The girls in this study proved that there are other factors of importance to them. The participants in this study point out the importance of academic achievement.

Reflections on academic performance

The girls believe that high academic performance is one of the essential elements to attain popularity in middle school. Because of this, girls are engaged learners. They seek out opportunities to learn and to demonstrate knowledge. They pay close attention in class. They participate in discussions. They often accomplish more than what is required of them. I clearly remember these same attitudes and behaviors in myself as a teen. Although academic competition may have some draw backs, for these girls it gives them the advantage of being at the top of their class academically. Their academic achievement may open doors to special clubs, schools, academic competitions, public recognition and better jobs. They have a larger world view and a good work ethic. They know that any achievement takes hard work, dedication and the perseverance to follow through until the end. Pipher (1994) does not find the same attitudes with girls. She infers that middle school girls hide their intelligence because they are in fear of looking like a nerd. The participants in my study did not follow this pattern. These girls take every possible opportunity to explore and communicate their achievements to the rest of the school. They often display their best work or share ideas with the class. They often try to out do one another.

Unlike Carol Gilligan's past research, Cohen's (1996) research focuses on lower socioeconomic schools, similar to

the school in this study. Cohen agrees that girls often negotiate their way through school by doing what is expected of them. In my own classroom, girls complete more work than do boys and girls have better grades than boys. I have observed girls "caring and concerned" more about their academic performance than are boys. Admittedly there are some drawbacks to all of the academic competition that takes place but overall I am convinced that girls benefit from including academic achievement as a factor in popularity. Adler (1992) agrees with my findings, she asserts that girls "gained status from their classmates for getting good grades and performing difficult assignments" (p.182).

Reflections on speaking out

The third factor of popularity for my participants is speaking out. I did observe girls speaking out before I started this study, but I did not really understand this phenomena. The interviews helped me to better understand the occurrence, the literature to assist me in understanding my findings. One helpful study by Cohen (1996) describes speaking out in the following terms,

> "Some girls tend to assert themselves, speaking out and insisting on being heard in both friendly and

> unfriendly circumstances. This approach is often used by a girl with a strong sense of herself, her identity, her ideas, and her place in the hierarchies of school and peer cultures" (p.14).

Speaking out is used by girls to amplify their voices. When their voices are raised loud enough to be heard, the girls receive the attention that they desire. This is very different than my own experience in middle school. I was painfully quiet. I wanted nothing more than to disappear into the gray colored cement walls of my classroom. But for my own daughter, speaking out is a part of her school culture. Many of her report cards have comments such as, "disruptive in class", "talkative", "speaks out".

As a teacher, speaking out is a very difficult behavior to manage. I want my pupils to be individual thinkers and expressive, but I do not want my classroom to be noisy and undirected. The girls who speak out in my class are the most popular girls. They are also often the brightest girls in the class. I find it difficult to extinguish their voices in a way that will not diminish their value in my classroom. Adler (1992) discusses similar issues in the arena of boys popularity but she omits speaking out from the area of girls popularity. She uses the terms of "toughness" and "savoir-faire" to describe comparable traits in boys.

Girls will be (and should be) girls

Gilligan (1982) speaks about a "different voice" that women have. She concludes that, "men and women may speak different languages that they assume are the same, using similar words to encode disparage experiences of self and social relationships" (p.173). I conclude that not only do girls speak a different language, they live in a different reality. Girls have their own code of existence. They see the world through their own lenses. Through the research, we can easily see that girls in different social settings are unique to that setting. My urban participants are unique. Their values and findings are unique to their setting. The great "cosmic connection" is that thread of uniqueness that the girls share.

As girls, we choose to embrace or struggle with the endless changes that take place in our bodies, with the inequities that exist between cultures, sexes and races, with the barrage of messages that invade our minds, and with the ways that we communicate with one another. I know of nothing better than being a girl. If I could choose my gender destiny, I would remain a female. But the road has not been easy. As a girl, the struggles have been difficult. As a mom, the struggles have been painful. As a teacher and researcher, the struggles have been enlightening. I know that the one thing certain about being a girl is that through our

differences, we are the same.

What's the point of all the hub bub?

Girls are social creatures. They thrive on interaction with other girls and we don't change much. Even as adults, women seek friendships with other women. We share and celebrate our womanhood together. These girls are sharing girlhood together. This bonding experience is good practice for future relationships.

Girls value their relationships with other girls. They talk about friends that they have had for years, even though they are only eleven years old. They invest their time, energy, and hearts in cultivating friendships.

Popularity seems to buy more friendships for these girls. More friendship translates to more attention.

Definition of Terms

Clique - a small, restricted circle of persons (Webster, 1983)

Culture - a system of beliefs, values, customs, and institutions that when linked serves a group to provide a person significant ways for survival (Garcia, 1982).

Learning Styles - The way in which a student receives and processes information.

Popularity - as stated previously, is being liked or accepted by the greatest number of people (Adler, 1992).

Relational aggression - acts intended to harm a child's interpersonal relationship with peers (Hodges, 1999)

Self-esteem - our judgments about our own worth (Elkind, 1994)

Participant Survey

Please answer the following questions. If you need additional space, you may use the back of this questionnaire. Thank you for participating in this study.

1. What are the requirements to be a popular girl in the sixth grade?

2. Who determines which girls are popular?

3. In my class, _____ is the most popular girl. (insert a

name) She is popular for the following reasons: (list as many as possible)

4. On a scale of one to ten, ten being the highest, one being the lowest, how do the following items relate to popularity?

Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important

School grades	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Athletic ability	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Clothing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Family background	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Physical beauty	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Shyness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Wealth	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Physical development	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Boyfriends	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Being able to	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

speak up for yourself										
The friends that you have	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Rudeness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Helping the teacher	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Fighting with others	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Grade cards	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Taking risks	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Prettiness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Friend-liness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Good attitude at school	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Smoking	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Helping others	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Sexual activity	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Being invited to parties	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Partici-pating in after school activities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Getting good grades on special projects	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Wearing make-up	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Looking more like an adult	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

5. What things do you do to become more popular?

6. Can a girls popularity change over time? If so, how?

7. Do you want to be more popular? If so, why?

8. What can you do to become more popular?

9. Do you ever wish you could be like another student in our

class? If so, who and why?

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